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AUTHOR	Dodge, Dorothy
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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to survey career attitudes of undergraduate women students, a pre-test/post-test research design was adopted. Questionnaire items attempted to measure career interests, the college role in forming or encouraging career choice, general personality characteristics, attitudes of respondents toward the college environment and their knowledge of women's employment patterns. The study admits to several limitations, including the fact that the questionnaire was given to a limited number of the undergraduate women in the U. S., and that the four groups sampled were not selected as a representative sample of all undergraduate women. Responses to the questionnaire did, however, point to a number of attitudes of the undergraduate women involved: (1) high career interests among those samples; (2) the negative views of faculty, administration, and curricular response to these interests; and (3) the lack of knowledge of women's activities, underlying the need for women's study programs. The author suggests that, in view of the high attitudinal uniformity found in this limited study, colleges and universities undertake evaluations of their responses to the needs of the undergraduate women. (Author/PC)

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Attitudes of Undergraduate Women Toward Careers,

A Study Funded by a Grant from the Office of Education,
U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare
1973

Dorothy Dodge
Macalester College
Saint Paul, Minnesota

June, 1974

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CG 009 193

CAREER GOALS AND ATTITUDES

OF UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE WOMEN

A Study Funded By a Grant from the Office of Education,

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE

1973

Dorothy Dodge
Macalester College

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The survey of women's career attitudes described below was undertaken at Macalester College as a result of a federal educational grant given to three Macalester women faculty members by the Midwest Regional Education Office of the Department of Health Education and Welfare. Undergraduate institutions have become increasingly concerned over counselling programs for women students and the impact of college curriculum, guidance programs, and general environment upon their career aspirations and commitment. The grant proposal involved construction of a questionnaire to survey attitudes of undergraduate women; a course on women writers; and a special career seminar to provide specific information on career options, training requirements for given careers, and conversations with women working in the fields concerning their experiences.

Questionnaire Design

In attempting to survey career attitudes of the undergraduate women students, a pre-test/post-test style of research design was adopted. Questionnaire items attempted to measure career interests; the college role in forming or encouraging career choices; general personality characteristics and attitudes of respondents

toward the environment; and their knowledge of women's employment patterns. This questionnaire was tested at a number of colleges before it was given at Macalester to be certain that specific items were not confusing, that it measured what was being surveyed and that it did not force respondents into inappropriate choices. The tested questionnaire was given as a pre-test to four groups of women students: 1) 156 women registered to participate in the special seminar devoted to women's careers in a wide variety of fields; 2) a control group of forty women not participating in the career seminar; 3) a special class in English devoted to analysis of women authors in contemporary literature; and 4) one hundred women students attending colleges and universities in other areas of the country. Some of these were small liberal arts colleges, while at least one group represented a large university in a metropolitan area.

Without prescribing those who could participate in the survey, an attempt was made to include representation from every class year. The breakdown for the career seminar group was:

49 freshmen
33 sophomores
34 juniors
36 seniors
3 others

In the English class the breakdown was 18 freshmen, 21 sophomores, 6 juniors, and 1 senior.

The Control Group had 7 freshmen, 17 sophomores, 8 juniors, 13 seniors and 2 others.

Outside group consisted of 17 freshmen, 25 sophomores, 47 juniors, 59 seniors and 1 other.

The career group and class were more heavily underclass women and the control and outside groups were more heavily upperclass women.

Those involved in the career seminar were re-tested a month after the completion of the special career week to attempt analysis of possible changes in response resulting from this experience. The class and control group were re-tested two months after the seminar. Since the control group was not involved i n the seminar, changes occurring in responses of this group might be attributed to other events on campus or in the news. The off-campus group was not re-tested. This group was intended to serve only as some measure of whether the Macalester women were totally different from women students at other campuses.

It was not proposed that the 350 women students included in the survey represented an accurate sample of all undergraduate women in the United States, since a great number of variables should be controlled before making such a claim. However, so little has been done in attempting to survey undergraduate attitudes toward careers, that this survey of the 350 students may be seen as a beginning. At minimum, admitting sample inaccuracy, the survey of the 350 women students avoids what seems to have been a recent practice, that is, concluding what women's attitudes are without asking them.

In addition, the results from the questionnaire may not necessarily be an accurate sample of the women in the student bodies surveyed. Women students electing to participate in a voluntary

career week at Macalester may represent those women already most career-oriented and, by voluntary selection, exclude those less committed. To permit some control of this factor, the class members and control group were not career seminar volunteers and were selected by either random course registration or by random sample in the dormitories. However, even the control group included those willing to tak e time to complete a questionnaire on women's attitudes, perhaps including those more aware of women's issues. The same criticism may be made of the off-campus group. Admitting these limitations, the alternative would have involved requiring women to participate in the study.

In analyzing the results of the questionnaires, these limitations should be kept in mind. The sample group may include those more interested in career opportunities or more aware of questions concerning women's status and role in contemporary America.

However, more information concerning the attitudes of this group of undergraduate women is valuable since little has been done to survey them, as well as women in general.

This sample design was repeated again during the 1973-74 academic year to avoid the possibility that any one year might be unrepresentative of student opinions. The results are reports in Section II.

Part One: Career Aspirations

The questionnaire was divided into four areas of concern. Part One centered on whether or not the student had

career aspirations after college. In the career seminar group, 76.28 percent expressed career commitment for both one year and ten years after graduation. The control group of forty was higher at 82.97 percent and the class of forty at 82.60 percent was also higher. There was a slight drop in the ten-year projection for careers to 78.72 percent for those two groups. Since these percentages for career concerns are so high, it might be assumed that the Macalester women students do not represent in any degree the attitudes of undergraduate women. However the survey of 100 outside women showed a similar 82.23 percent expressing career commitment. In response to the question of whether they "had what it takes" to be successful in their chosen careers, over 75 percent of the four groups answered affirmatively. Career choices were heavily professional with white collar as an alternative choice receiving little selection, perhaps suggesting recent feminine protest against secretarial careers as an only option rather than a real choice.

The women's liberation movement may have had an influence in the career aspirations expressed and the confidence in the ability of women to succeed. In response to a question concerning the impact of women's liberation, over eighty percent of all groups selected discrimination and status as the two areas of significance. Political activity, marriage, or definition of femininity were virtually ignored by respondents.

Possible factors preventing the achievement of their career aspirations centered most heavily on money concerns. Lack of desire to continue was placed very low, although

upper classmen were most convinced of their desire and freshmen less so. Marriage preventing a career was named by fewer than ten percent as a possible deterrent to a full time career. Discrimination against women was named as a deterrent by less than five percent in all four groups,although discrimination in their chosen field was recognized by 73.07 percent of the career seminar group; 62.50 percent of the outside group; and 61.70 percent of the control group.

But only 43.47 percent of the literature class group mentioned discrimination against women in their fields. English and humanities majors may perceive less discriminatory practice, since more women are employed in these fields.

In response to a question regarding success in their chosen career, discrimination by employers was seen as the most significant factor. Objections from male peers and family or lack of ability or desire were classes as virtually insignificant factors.

The career seminar experience had a limited influence upon these attitudes. Post questionnaires showed a slightly higher percentage committed to careers, increasing for the career seminar group from 76.28 to 80 percent. Little change occurred in the selection of deterrents to career choices, with money again the most frequent response.

The question showing greatest change was the one on existence of discrimination in their chosen field. The career seminar group moved from 73.07 percent responding yes in the pre-test to 91 percent in the post-questionnaire.

The class changedfrom 43.47 percent to 52 percent. Discrimination, however, was not mentioned as a deterrent to career commitment with any greater frequency than on the pre-questionnaire.

Although those involved in the sample group are not claimed to represent all undergraduate women, the results from the 350-student sample suggested that career interests among women students may be higher than the mass media have frequently concluded. The image of the woman as full-time homemaker, at least for this sample, does not appear to hold much attraction.

When asked what they expected to be doing ten years after graduation, over 75 percent student selected career rather than part-time position, housewife, or mother.

Part Two: The College Role

Part two of the questionnaire centered on the role of the college in the life choices of undergraduate women. The Newman Commission Report concluded that college and university experiences were often deterrents to women pursuing careers and that the four undergraduate years frequently exhibited a steady decline in career desire. The Report questions the college and university administrative and faculty attitudes and counseling that may produce such a decline.

The Newman Commssion Report was partially supported by the questionnaire results. For all those sampled, the college or university did not apparently play a significant role in the career commitment of the women. Over 40 percent of the Macalester women indicated a specific career choice before coming to college

and little change in this career choice or commitment during their undergraduate years. The outside group showed a higher career choice before entering college at 61.84 percent, and over 50 percent indicating no change during the college years. Differing from the Newman Report, there was no significant decline in career commitment during college years. Of those indicating that their career choice was made during the college years, less than 30 percent named college courses, counseling, or experiences as a primary factor in their choice. The post questionnaire groups revealed little revision in these interpretations of the college role.

In response to a question concerning faculty career counseling for women, fewer than ten percent of the groups sampled described faculty as encouraging them or providing needed information. On the other hand, only ten percent described faculty as discouraging. Over 55 percent of all groups sampled pictured faculty and administrators as providing neither encouragement or discouragement, suggesting a very minor role or impact.

In regard to their classroom experiences, the results were less uniform. Those surveyed were asked to rate their responses on a scale from 1 to 5, from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The career seminar group responses were spread evenly over two, three, four and five on whether women needed to overproduce in classes, are subordinated to male classmates, or are seen as less serious students than men by male professors, indicating mixed experience tending to include

more negative than positive ranking. The control group, containing more upperclasswomen, strongly disagreed at 4 and 5 on all these questions. Although it had more upperclasswomen, the outside group responses were similar to the career seminar group tending toward the negative. The class again saw little discrimination.

Upper classwomen's experience would appear less mixed than that of underclasswomen at Macalester. Interestingly, in response to a question whether female professors were better able or willing to discuss career problems with women students, all four groups spread evenly over 2, 3, 4 and 5 - indicating mixed experience and tending to be more negative than positive.

Although the Newman Report suggestion of decline of career aspirations during undergraduate years was not borne out by questionnaire results, the college role in career information and encouragement appeared minimal. Administrative personnel and faculty might raise questions concerning counseling and curriculum in the face of such responses. The mixed classroom experience indicated by the 156 career group and 100 outside group should prompt additional evaluations of classroom procedures and faculty attitudes. The upperclasswoman tending to be a major in a department and involved heavily in departmental courses perceived less need for overproducing or proving herself as a student. Non-majors and beginning students indicated a mixed experience with perceptions of the requirement to overproduce and prove themselves in relation to the male student.

Despite these negative aspects of the college role, over 58 percent in all four groups cited an education as significant in their eventual career success.

It was not anticipated that the experience of the career seminar would revise these answers significantly. The only major revision occurred in the perceptions of the importance of education for a career. Post questionnaire results showed greater mixing in the ratings and a lowering of significance from the pre-test results. The decreased perception of the significance of a college education for career success may be in response to a variety of training requirements for differing careers and the necessity is not for a degree.

Part Three: Personality Characteristics of the Respondents

Questions in Part Three were aimed at attitudes and perceptions of the environment, society, and women's role in contemporary America. In response to a set of questions concerning attitudes toward the future, all four groups showed a mixed reaction. On the items concerning whether or not there is any meaning to life or rules by which to live, or whether most success should be attributed to luck, the responses were mixed fairly evenly across the 1 to 5 rating scale, suggesting concern by youth over these items and confusion about the meaning of rules. Highly negative responses were given as to whether or not an individual could plan the future or hope for success in life. Over 60 percent of each group responded at 5, further indicating the uncertainty and tentativeness seen in

modern life. The question on whether the world is basically a friendly place also drew mixed reactions, again spreading evenly across the 1 to 5 scale. Although the role of outside forces playing on the individual was mixed and tending toward the negative, the picture of a successful individual was less so. Over 70 percent of all groups listed ambition as the most significant characteristic for success and 60 percent listed hard work rather than luck as the key to advancement. Competition and competitiveness were not seen as undesirable, but necessary personality attributes by 75 percent of the control group. The career seminar group agreed at 55 percent.

A second set of items in Part Three attempted to sruvey attitudes toward the image of women in society rather than the individual woman's career goals. Over 72 percent of all four groups agreed that employers feel women are emotionally unfit for executive positions, but over 72 percent of all four groups surveyed maintained that women and men were equally able to hold such professional and executive positions. To a series of items surveying attitudes toward the family, an even higher percentage rejected the notion that a career and family were necessarily exclusive. Sixty percent of all four groups denied the old cliche that women come to college to find a husband. Supporting these indications of a changing view of women's role in society, the item asking whether a happy family life was the most satisfying goal in life received mixed response, again spreading evenly from 1 to 5.

The post-questionnaire suggested several marked shifts. The view of the world as friendly increased significantly and the ability to plan the future received more favorable reaction,

perhaps in response to the special seminar providing counseling for women. Response to the item of whether the job should come first changed from 72 percent negative on the pre-test to 44% affirmative on the post-test, suggesting higher career commitment. The view of men and women as equally able raised ten percentage points.

The ability to mix career and family, however, dropped from a pre-test 82 percent in the career seminar group to a mixed response spread evenly over the 1 to 5 scale. This realization of possible care er-marriage conflicts, however, did not lower the percentages of women expressing career commitment on the post-questionnaire.

Some writers on women's career desires and movements have suggested that the woman seeking a career or equality represents only the most aggressive personality type among the population rather than women in general. These responses must raise some doubts about such a conclusion. If the sample group surveyed included only the most career-oriented women students, and, by inference, the most aggressive, their responses suggest concern and doubt over rules, meaning, and predictability of life exhibited by many students in modern America, and not the assured or confident personality characteristics often attributed to the "aggressive" woman.

The survey responses do suggest a changed perception of the roles of women and their life choices, and an overwhelming desire by college women to contribute their abilities and talents in new avenues often not open to women in the past.

If these results reflect undergraduate attitudes only for the sample group and the most career-oriented, and not necessarily for all undergraduate women, colleges and universities would still be advised to re-examine their practices in regard to such undergraduate women in view of the high commitment and concern expressed by the sample group.

Part Four: Knowledge of Women's Affairs

Part Four of the questionnaire contained a series of factual items concerning the number of women presently employed in a variety of professional, white collar, and blue collar positions; their salary and promotion patterns in relation to males; and civil rights protection for women under the new federal guidelines. These items were selected in attempting to ascertain general knowledge of women's career patterns by undergraduate women. Results were very mixed, suggesting limited specific knowledge. Women's studies programs have been undertaken recently by a number of colleges and universities. These results tend to underscore the need for such programs if knowledge of women's patterns is to increase. Only five items obtained over 50 percent accuracy from the career seminar group. Sixty percent correctly identified the percentage of women in white collar jobs, and the number of women in Congress, although they could not identify individual women and their states with high frequency. Fifty-one percent identified the number of women college graduates and an equal 51 percent knew the federal agency hearing reports of cases of discrimination against women. On the other hand, median women's wages in 1970 scored a low 18 percent accuracy

and the percentage of women faculty in the United States less than 21 percent. Results for the control group, class group, and outside group showed response patterns very similar to the career seminar group.

No attempt was made during the career seminar week to instruct participants specifically concerning these factual items. Since participants attended career discussions in fields of their choice, the information provided at each session varied necessarily.

The post-test results reaffirmed the possible variety among the sessions. Responses were very scattered, suggesting continued confusion and lack of information. Career seminars do not appear to be the most effective means available for increasing knowledge of women's affairs since they attempt to provide knowledge of specific career opportunities and training requirements, but do not automatically increase knowledge of general patterns of women's activities. A women's studies program in addition to a career seminar should be undertaken if knowledge of women's activities is to increase.

SECTION II

The pre-questionnaire and post-questionnaires were administered again in the academic year of 1973-74 to a new group of undergraduate women participating in a second career seminar for women. the 1973-74 set of questionnaires were included in the research design to measure whether or not women's

attitudes toward careers might shift significantly from one academic year to another or whether a second group of undergraduate women participating in a career seminar might respond in a markedly different fashion to the items included in the questionnaire. Fifty-one women are included in the second set of questionnaires, representing every class year but preponderantly sophomore and freshman.

Part One

This section of the questionnaire contained items relating to career interests and concerns of undergraduate women. Career commitment was higher in the second year responses. Of the 1972-73 group, 72.28 percent indicated career aspirations after college. The 1973-74 group expressed career commitment at 86.27 percent in the pre-questionnaire and at 88 percent after the career seminar. Ten-year projections of career commitment were similar at over 72 percent for both academic years sampled. Confidence by the 1973-74 group in a woman's ability to pursue any career of her choice was also higher. Of the 1973-74 group, 86 percent responded affirmatively to an item concerning whether they had what it takes to be successful in a chosen career, in contrast to the 75 percent affirmative response of the 1972-73 sample. Choices of career in the 1973-74 group were less heavily professional with more women selecting white collar and vocational careers as well as professional.

The impact of the women's liberation movement was perceived in a similar fashion by both years. Eighty percent of the 1973-74

group selected the activities in areas of discrimination against women as the main thrust of the movement. Again, political activity, marriage, or women's roles in society were virtually ignored.

To a set of items concerning deterrents to a career, the 1973-74 group showed some difference in response from the 1972-73 group. Money was not selected as the primary factor deterring women from careers of their choice. Responses were mixed and included discrimination, family disapproval, and desire as well as money. Marriage again was ignored as a factor by the 1973-74 group. In response to an item asking the primary factor responsible for the respondent not achieving her career goals, desire was selected by 86 percent of the 1973-74 group rather than the money response of the 1972-73 group, suggesting that the 1973-74 group saw little deterrent to success other than their own desire and determination.

Further supporting the interpretation that career concerns and interests were expressed by a higher percentage of the 1973-74 group, on the items relating to career interests, a consistent 86 percent of the respondents affirmed career goals and concerns, contrasted to the 75 percent of the 1972-73 group. The most significant shift between the two academic years occurred on items relating to deterrents to career goals. The 1972-73 group pointed to a number of factors such as discrimination, family objection, or determination as well as money.

Part Two

The items in this section explored the role of the college in the life choices of undergraduate women. This section contained a number of significant changes in response between the two years. Although both groups perceived a college education as significant in achieving career goals, a higher percentage of the 1973-74 group (72 percent) described faculty as providing no career counseling and a third responded that faculty recommended they follow career fields other than their choice. Classroom experiences also drew a markedly different set of responses from the 1973-74 group. While the 1972-73 group showed a mixed response from negative to positive on a scale from 0 to 5, the 1973-74 group was heavier in negative responses. Thirty-three percent responded at the"strongly agree"ranking to the item of whether women are required to overproduce in classes and negative rankings represented 50 percent of the resonse. The same percentages also agreed that male professors subordinate women students to the male while a majority felt they were treated as equals in their major departments, over 50 percent also perceived that there was a tendency to isolate them in their classes. Male professors were criticized by over 70% for taking male students more seriously. Differing significantly from the 1972-73 group, the '73-'74 sample agreed that female professors were more responsive to their career concerns and needs by over 51 percent of the rankings.

These shifts are not easily explainable since it is doubtful if classroom instructional styles have changed

significantly in the two academic years, given the small turnover of faculty at the college during this period. These shifts in perceptions of college experience may stem in part from the two year program funded by H.E.W. permitting increased attention to women's career interests. Exposure to the seminar and course and increased discussion of careers on campus may have increased undergraduate women's awareness of their career and curricular interests. Differing from the 1972-73 responses, the post questionnaires after the career seminars increased the perceptions of classroom negative experience. For example the perception that male professors consider male students more seriously than female rose from 70 percent strongly agree to 83 percent strongly agree. Other items also showed slight increases in the percentage of pre-questionnaire responses such as female professors showing more career concerns for women students. These results suggest that the career seminars may have been a factor in increasing the number of negative perceptions and performed a possible consciousness-raising function on career counseling for women.

Part III

The items in this section of the questionnaire centered on personality characteristics of respondents. Little change in responses was reflected btween the two groups. For example, competition as a necessary attribute for success was selected by 75 percent of the pre-questionnaire 1973-74 group similar to the responses of the 1972-73 group. However the 1973-74

post-questionnaire responses to this item rose to 89 percent. Concern over modern life and its meaning was also expressed by the 1973-74 group, with 80 percent arguing that ability to plan the future was uncertain and that the meaning of life was of frequent concern. Similar to the 1972-73 group the role of outside forces playing on the individual was seen as negative and the item on the world as a friendly place drew a mixed response.

Although both years reflected the uncertainty and tentativeness of modern life in their responses, they were in agreement in their view of the successful indigidual. Success was perceived as strongly related to competitiveness, education, or hard work rather than luck or forces outside the individual. The post questionnaire results for the 1973-74 group showed a slight strengthening of these responses but no significant shifts in response.

The attitudes expressed toward women's role in society were also very similar to those found for the 1972-73 group, with discrimination against women as the primary concern. However there was less support for the notion that the job should come first, dropping from the 72 percent of the 1972-73 group to 61 percent. There also was less apprehension expressed by the 1973-74 group to the possibility of a career and family mixture, but career concerns were again given priority over marriage.

Part Four

Items in this section centered on knowledge of women's affairs and were factual in nature rather than relating to attitudes

or perceptions. The responses paralleled the 1972-73 group. Knowledge of women's affairs was lacking and few items received a large percentage of current selection of factual data, reaffirming the need for women's studies in college curricular offerings.

Conclusion

Reaffirming the warning about the study representing a beginning rather than the final word on undergraduate women's career attitudes, it should be stated again that this questionnaire involved a limited number of the undergraduate women in the United States, and the four groups sampled in 1972-73 and the one group in 1973-74 were not selected as a representative sample of all undergraduate women. Admitting the sample problem discussed above, the questionnaire results point to a number of attitudes of the undergraduate women involved:

1. the high career interests of those sampled;
2. the negative views of faculty, administration, and curricular response to these interests, and
3. the lack of knowledge of women's activities underlying the need for women's study programs.

Much in the way of additional data collection and analysis should be undertaken before any conclusions are drawn for undergraduate women in general. However colleges and universities might well undertake evaluations of their responses to the needs of the undergraduate woman in view of the high uniformity of

undergraduate women's attitudes suggested by this survey, and, in particular the negative perceptions of the 1973-74 group. Since the study does involve a substantial number of Macalester women, Macalester College should evaluate the results carefully and respond to the criticisms implied.